Interview with Esther Peterson

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Program
Foreign Service Spouse Series

ESTHER PETERSON

Interviewed by: Jewell Fenzi

Initial interview date: December 16, 1992

Q: This is Jewell Fenzi on Wednesday, December 16, 1992. I am interviewing, for a second time, Esther Peterson at her home. The first interview was done by Hope Meyers a number of years ago.

In the early 1970s, Hope asked Joan Wilson, who was then in charge of what was called the Family Workshop at FSI to do an oral history. We had only the big-reel machines then, and it was cumbersome and expensive. It is still expensive, because of transcribing tapes. Hope had the [idea to interview spouses] but really wasn't able to execute it. Well, I think the time wasn't right.

PETERSON: You know, I think you're right, it was too early.

Q: It was too early. She was a very creative person and really had a very innovative mind and I miss her, because she was so helpful to the project. But before I met Hope, I had just started interviewing because a friend had asked me to help her with her interviews because she wanted to do a book. I did one interview and thought, well, it's interesting. But then I asked that interviewee, Frances Dixon, if she could suggest anyone. She suggested Penne Laingen — this was after her husband Bruce had been released in Iran.

I played that tape for [Donald A. Ritchie] the president of the Oral History Association, and he said, “You have an undocumented history here. Find some money and go for it.”

PETERSON: How wonderful!

Q: And that was six years ago.

PETERSON: Congratulations. Isn't it wonderful the way these things turn around.

Q: Well, thanks to people like you who've been willing to share their invaluable experiences with us.

PETERSON: There's a great period of my life, certainly.

Q: We were talking, before we turned the tape on, about the young women who suffer an identity loss when they come into the Service today. But you must have had the same experience.

PETERSON: In a way yes, in a way no. The times were different, but I think my background in the labor movement, and Oliver being a labor attach#, there was a kind of parallel. So I was able to do things — oh, for example, I wrote the study on household employment when I was there [in Sweden] for the Labor Department because I understood the employment situation — I think I included that in the interview about that, didn't I?

Q: Was that a study for our Labor Department?

PETERSON: Yes.

Q: Then some of the work you did later was for the Swedish?

PETERSON: No. The employment that I had was definitely to write the study for the Labor Department. Because I was very impressed — I think I said in the story — that when

people said “I don't want to pay overtime” — and I thought “Overtime costs? To servants? Someone in the house?” It opened up a whole...

Q: “Let's look into that.”

PETERSON: And then I talked to them at home [in the U.S.] and they said, “This is something we've never had: domestic servants covered under the Fair Labor Standards Act. It would be wonderful if we could begin to know what other countries are doing.” So it gave me an entr#e as a volunteer — it was just on my own, and they did pay me for it after I put it together — but it opened doors for me. So, in a way, it wasn't that hard for me.

And then the labor movement that I had worked for — I had to give up my job, of course, when all that happened — they called me once to come back and even bring my son because of the contacts I had, they had me go to London to represent the labor movement at a big conference. So I wasn't separated: I wasn't earning money — does that explain it?

Q: Yes, it does. Well, first of all you were occupied with your children.

PETERSON: Oh, I was very occupied. And some of those were the real problems, of course.

Q: I'm quoting you, “I found it harder to be a diplomat's wife than [an employed woman in the United States]”. (both laugh)

PETERSON: This is very true, very true. When you couldn't arrange the time when you wanted it [for your children]. But I think your point is well taken, and I was fortunate to have had the experience in the kind of thing which fed into not only my husband's work but where I had had experience. I remember going to the clothing factories and talking to them about putting these things together, and they all fit in with what I was already doing.

Q: There was no resentment on the part of the Swedish labor people.

PETERSON: No, they accepted me wonderfully.

Q: I suspect your reputation, and your husband's had preceded you.

PETERSON: Probably. I don't know. They had very good publicity. This woman who lobbied for labor interviewed me — I'm sure I've got it in my clips somewhere. But I was accepted, no doubt about it. I was accepted by the Social Democrats and that's the group we were assigned to get to know. Because the conservative Labor Party had the usual, but nobody knew the trade union people as well; that's why Oliver was able to do that. So it fit in.

Q: It must have been a very interesting time, because Murray (Weisz) has explained to me that — I guess the first labor attach#s went to Latin America in the early 40s? [Morris Weisz originally a trade unionist, had a long and distinguished career in U.S. government domestic labor agencies and with the Department of State, a career which spanned four decades. His assignments abroad included Paris, France, in 1952, where he was in the Labor Office of the Marshall Plan. In 1957 he returned to the Department of Labor for a number of domestic and international assignments, including a tour as Deputy to then Assistant Secretary of Labor, Esther Peterson]

PETERSON: Wasn't the first one to England? [According to Harold Davey of the U.S. Department of Labor, the first labor attach# was Dan Horowitz appointed to Santiago, Chile in 1943. Samuel D. Berger began his service in London in 1942 working on lend-lease; subsequently he became labor attach# there.]

Q: Well, maybe I should say, went to Latin America before the War, and then afterward, as was the case in Sweden, we suddenly had governments that we had to work with on that level. So you were really a pioneer.

PETERSON: They needed people who understood — isn't that interesting. I hadn't realized about Latin America.

Q: Yes. One woman, Mildred Glazer, Joe Glazer's...

PETERSON: But he came in much later, I'm quite sure of that. We're good friends.

Q: You are right, he went to Mexico in 1961. In the little note your secretary sent me you said you had some anecdotes about your "two for the price of one" experiences in Sweden, and I asked Murray today if he could give me some examples, and he said, "Oh, she was with me just the other evening and we talked about a lot of things —"

PETERSON: We did. Well, I know the Department people were very helpful to me and they seemed to like what I did, and we were included in things all the time. Ambassador Butterwort[William Walton Butterworth, AE/P Sweden 1950-53], I think it was, said "we got two for the price of one" or something like that.

Q: Of course, that's been a catch phrase, but in those days it wasn't necessarily pejorative.

PETERSON: That's very true.

Q: We were there as a team, together, and we were happy. How we could translate that today?

PETERSON: What happened to you? Did you have a career before?

Q: Not really. I write, and you can do that anywhere. And I also was in countries where they needed someone who could write English, so I had no problem.

PETERSON: Mine was knowing this area, I guess.

Q: And having your expertise before you went and knowing what you were interested in when you got there. I envy you that, because you didn't waste any time foraying out into the community to locate an interest.

PETERSON: We went right into the community, and I know some of the people in the embassy resented it a bit. We put our kids in public school instead of the French school, we shopped at the co-op — I'll never forget one of those people who sai[affecting nose-in-the-air tone], “One does NOT shop at the Konsum.” The co-op was the Swedish consumers' cooperative.

Q: And why wouldn't you shop there?

PETERSON: Why wouldn't I! We were “lowering” ourselves — you see, that's a class society, and a lot of our Foreign Service people were exactly like that, they loved it, some, not all of them to be honest. “Oh, but you don't need to shop.” I'll never forget that. “I want to shop there; I want to do whatever the people here do.”

Q: In your first interview, I was interested in one thing: from a Labor point of view — I asked Murray about this and he laughed and said, “The Foreign Service made scabs of its wives.” (both laugh)

PETERSON: I love that!

Q: (laughing) But that's the one thing I really have come to ask you.

PETERSON:Oh, that's really wonderful. And that's where “two for the price of one” comes in. I'm very glad you asked it, because I just felt that I worked harder, with no pay, in support, so I lost not only my pay when I came but I had to do all these kinds of things that weren't necessary.

Q: Because there must have been some contradiction in being there with the Labor government, I'm sure the Swedes embraced you for that.

PETERSON: We were all good friends, no doubt about that. I think my dearest friend became the only woman in the trade union movement — Sigrid Eckendal, I must have talked about her — and because she had been elevated, it helped to accept me. And then I think it helped a lot because Oliver had the trade unionists come to the States, as I said earlier.

Q: And you were here, fortunately.

PETERSON: They had sent me back to help with something. And when they saw me being accepted by all the top Labor people here, I think that also made me acceptable. Except — it's very interesting — every once in a while they would have stag parties, when Sigrid and I would not be invited.

Q: I can believe that, in Europe.

PETERSON: Of course!

Q: This was about 1940?

PETERSON: Yes.

Q: To ask you one other thing: people have mentioned that you worked on something that Mrs. Roosevelt was connected with, but you were executive director of that organization. Did you really know her well, did you work with her? [From 1961 to 1963, Mrs. Peterson was executive vice chair of the President's Commission on the Status of Women. Eleanor Roosevelt chaired the commission.]

PETERSON: I think I did.

Q: You probably knew her better than anyone else.

PETERSON: Not everyone, no, but I did know her. I think when she came to Sweden — I'd known her before — and I'll never forget, [Ambassador H. Freeman] “Doc” Matthew[H. Freeman Matthews was EE/MP and AE/P to Sweden 1947-1950] said, “Well, Esther, you'll have to be kind of program officer and help.” So I did and went with her a great deal, had to kind of do the preliminary groundwork. So I was with her there a good deal, yes. I think one of the nicest stories she told me when she came to Sweden, when we discussed where she would sit, she said, “Mrs. Peterso(she always called me) put the most interesting person on my left, (I think it was) side, because that ear is better.” I'm quite sure it was on her left — she was well aware of protocol and all of that, of course. Oh, she was delightful.

Q: And she had an absolutely extraordinary mind.

PETERSON:(a gasp of agreement)She wanted to visit a big plant, and I was to go out first to prepare the way. So they sent me out in Ambassador Matthews' car and he said, “Do whatever you can to help her, Esther, do this for us.” The streets were lined and seeing the official car, they thought I was Mrs. Roosevelt. I was horrified. Do you know what I did? I got down on the floor of the limousine, (both laughing) I shall never forget it, 'til I got there. “I'm just coming to be sure everything is ready for Mrs. Roosevelt, I'm NOT Mrs. Roosevelt!” It was so embarrassing.

One of the things I remember is her kindness to everybody. Everybody that helped her she gave an envelope to, and I know it was so many — drivers, aides, ordinary [people]. What a beautiful woman. You know, I have a mink coat of hers.

Q: Yes! [Given to you by] the Woman's National Democratic Club. Do you wear it?

PETERSON: I'm not a mink person but I like it. I've shrunk a bit in my older age; she was a little larger. I've always said when I think about her, “What would she do in this situation?”

I've had some rather trying times at the UN in the work I've been doing. Then I think, “Esther, put her coat on and her arms around you, you'll do the right thing!” (both laugh)It does make you feel that way with her. And I feel very close to her ideas. So I was very fortunate. I've been at her house, I stayed at Valkil[the house Eleanor Roosevelt built for herself on the grounds of Hyde Park. There were workshops for women, and men (e.g., furniture making,) to encourage worker self sufficiency.] up at Hyde Park a good deal when we were working on the commission. Yes, she remains always the great heroine for me.Did I answer your question?

Q: I think you did, I was looking for anecdotes. You see, no one else that I've interviewed has known her well enough — they've been on a commission or something that she headed but she was just a titular person, but you truly worked with her.

PETERSON: The wonderful thing was, I knew her before, because when I was teaching at Bryn Mawr Summer School, she would come to the school. She used to let us take the girls from the sweatshops up to Valkill, so I've been at her home with those girls. She always invited us in, it was so absolutely wonderful there. So I had known her, and when I met her again in Stockholm, she remembered me and called me by my name. Isn't that remarkable?

Q: How did you get involved in Labor?

PETERSON: When I was teaching in Boston at Windsor School, a very exclusive girls school. The real thing was that my Oliver was at Harvard, as a sociologist. He was rather angry with me for my narrow — I was a dyed-in-the-wool Republican from Utah, you know. Anyway I volunteered, always in the church, and he said, “Do something else, Esther, here are new opportunities.” And I volunteered at the Y, and got in the industrial department where the girls in the sweatshops came one night a week and the maids in the homes of the people I talked t(laughter).So I had it so sharp in my life at that time.

One night they didn't come, and I said, “Oh, that's awful, there's a strike, how terrible.” And Oliver said, “Esther, don't say that until you find out WHY.” So he went off to Cambridge with me to the slums, and I talked to the parents, I talked to the girls the next morning, I was on the picket line with them.

Q: Why hadn't they come? No transportation??

PETERSON: No, they had gone on strike because the price had been changed. Oliver said, “Don't condemn them until you find out why.” In the slums I saw industrial home work, which I'd never seen in my life. I saw the whole thing; everybody had to work or they didn't eat. It opened up a whole new — I just felt, “I've got to work in the Labor movement, I've got to help alleviate a lot of the — “

So I helped organize that first strike. They were getting $l.32. They were making 12 Hoover aprons and their pay envelopes were $5 to $7 a week, which was something for them even in those days. And the apron pattern was changed from a square pocket to a heart and it was very hard for them to sew the corners and make at that rate, and there was this spontaneous strike. So we named it — I helped them with it —”heartbreakers' strike” and I got a lot of women to help, and we won, got a new contract. You asked how I got started: that was it.

Q: It never would have occurred to me that you would have opposed the ERA [Equal Rights Amendment] —

PETERSON: Well, that was because during that period — we had worked so hard to get these laws through in those states. And the people that were for the ERA at that time were not for giving the wage to these working women. So I said, 'You wait until we get the Equal Pay bill through, get them covered by the Fair Labor Standards Act, get the unions to — then I'll be for the ERA—and we got it and I changed my mind.

Honey, I've had too much experience on the Hill with these employers. When they said, “Oh, we are for the ERA” I thought, “The heck with you.” You understand?

Q: Of course, yes.

PETERSON: So I was definitely against it, until we had these three very essentials. That was one of the things I worked very hard on, and Mrs. Roosevelt helped by getting the Equal Pay bill and to get coverage under the Fair Labor Standards Act.

In that connection I can tell you a good story about Mrs. Roosevelt. When we were working to get the girls covered under the latter act, which I had worked hard on, the retail workers in the wonderful fancy shops along Fifth Avenue didn't even get the minimum wage. They wrote a letter to the Wage and Hour people saying that they should get at least the minimum wage. The answer went back, “But you're not in interstate commerce.” The Act only covers industries in interstate commerce, and I knew this. Bu(laughing) the girls got together and they wrote a letter saying, “We sell Mrs. Roosevelt her underwear. If she isn't in interstate commerce we don't know what is!!” (hearty laughter) And it helped us get the bill through. Isn't that wonderful? So she was always kind of, in my life, an emblem of — and she understood this, she was definitely a feminist and wanted it to go ahead but she would not deny what we already had until we had it backed up to the others. Anyway, it was an exciting time.

Q: A very exciting time. I hope we're going to have exciting times now.

PETERSON: Oh, I think we are, my dear, I think we are. Isn't it great?The fact that I've lived this long, lived to see this change — oh, we've been having such an awful time lately, you know. And I've had nothing but trouble with the U.S. at the U.N. on things I've been working toward. So I think we're in a new day.

Q: That's one of the nice things about living in Washington.

PETERSON: Isn't it exciting?

Q: And how much a part of it you've been.

PETERSON: I've touched a little bit of it, here and there. I think if I ever really wrote something I'd like it to be a story of Oliver's getting involved, and how we have had a little bit to do with the big social movements. A little bit, not front and center, but we've certainly been in the fringe of the Labor movement, the women's movement, the consumer movement, and these things we've been able to affect.

Q: You haven't done your memoirs?

PETERSON: I'm working on it but I'm not a writer, you're a writer.

Q: But you know, you really should — may I make a suggestion? (granted) Your memoirs really are so important. Work with a professional journalist.

PETERSON: I'm really considering that now, and I've had a girl come and I've taped a number of things and she transcribes for me. I'm working at that now. I might. I don't have a professional journalist, no.

Q: Do you have plans for your papers?

PETERSON: They go to Schlesinger and Consumers Union. I had a feeling that people would not go to Schlesinger for [the Consumer Union] information, yet I really have a history of the consumer movement in my files.

Q: If I could make another suggestion, if you gave your papers to the Schlesinger right now and someone could go in and work on them and come back to you for explanations and input, that would be fantastic.

PETERSON: I ought to do something like that. They tell me they want everything, but Consumers Union now has a big archives, so I've thought I'd devise some things and the others to — I think you're right, I might be able to do that.

Q: You're working at the U.N. as a volunteer?

PETERSON: For the International Organization of Consumers. This is work that has to be done and unfortunately they have no money, so I've volunteered. But my theory is, the way I'm doing it, is that I'll work until it's so proven that it has to be done that it will become a paying job. Then I will not be a scab on the issue at all. I've felt that all along — that those of us who can volunteer, move in where there are jobs once it is recognized as essential work. I've been trying to do that in a number of areas, and I think it works. [On February 11, 1994, President Clinton appointed Mrs. Peterson as a U.S. representative to the 48th session of the United Nations' General Assembly.]

Q: I think so, too. We started this project totally on a volunteer basis, thinking that it needed to be done.

PETERSON: Exactly.

Q: And by proving that it had value, we've been successful.

PETERSON: Good luck to you!

Q: Thank you.

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BIOGRAPHIC DATA

Spouse: Oliver A. Peterson

Spouse Entered Service:1948Left Service: 1961You Entered Service:1948Left Service: 1957

Status: Widow

Posts: 1948Stockholm. Sweden early 1950sBrussels, Belgium 1957Washington, DC

Spouse's Position: 1948-57Labor Attach# 1957-61Labor Advisor, Bureau of African Affairs

Place and Date of birth: 1906, Provo, Utah

Maiden Name: Eggersten

Parents (Name, Profession):Lars Eggersten, Superintendent of Schools, Provo, Utah

Annie Nielsen Eggersten

Schools (Prep, University):

BA, 1927, Brigham Young University

MA, 1930, Teachers College, Columbia University

Date and Place of Marriage: New York, 1932

Profession: Consumer Advocate

Children:Karen Peterson Wilken 3/30/38

Eric Niels Peterson 5/25/30

Iver Peterson 6/30/42

Lars Erling Peterson 3/11/46

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Esther Peterson has had a distinguished career in the fields of labor, women's issues, and consumer affairs.

She has held high-level posts under three United States Presidents. John F. Kennedy appointed her Director of the Women's Bureau in the Labor Department (1961); Assistant Secretary of Labor for Labor Standards (1961-69); and Executive Vice Chair of the President's Commission on the Status of Women (1961-63). Eleanor Roosevelt was Chair of this Commission. Under Lyndon B. Johnson, she was, the first Special Assistant to the President for Consumer Affairs (1964-67) and Chair of the President's Committee on Consumer Interests (1964-67). As Special Assistant, she served as consumer spokesperson and advised the President on consumer-related matters. She served in this capacity again under President Jimmy Carter, who also called upon her to chair the Consumer Affairs Council, which he created to ensure that consumers had a voice in federal policy-making and programs.

From 1970 to 1977, Mrs. Peterson was Vice President of Consumer Programs and consumer adviser to the President of Giant Food Corporation, where she spearheaded numerous innovative consumer-related projects.

Active in the labor movement since the 1930s, Mrs. Peterson was Assistant Director of Education of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers (1939-44) and served as the union's legislative representative (1945-48). From 1957 to 1961, she was legislative representative of the Industrial Union Department of the AFL-CIO.

Early in her career, Mrs. Peterson taught at Branch Agricultural College in Utah, Winsor School in Boston, and Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers in Industry. She received her master's degree from Teachers College, Columbia University and has been awarded honorary degrees from many universities. Mrs. Peterson's numerous

awards include the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Other awards include the Food Marketing Institute's Industry Statesmanship Award, the Trumpeter Award from the National Consumers League and the Phillip Hart Consumer Award from the Consumer Federation of America. She was elected to the State of Utah's Beehive Hall of Fame.

Mrs. Peterson speaks before organizations throughout the United States and in other countries and serves on the boards of directors of many consumer, educational, end civic associations. She has had her own consumer radio talk show and has appeared on various television news and talk shows speaking directly to consumers on current issues.

Since 1984 she has served as the representative to the United Nations (ECOSOC) in New York for the International Organizations of Consumers Unions (IOCU). She serves as a volunteer traveling extensively for IOCU throughout Asia, South America, Europe and Africa. She has helped to secure passage of the Guidelines for Consumer Protection by the UN General Assembly, and has also helped to win passage in the UN of the 'Consolidated List of Products Whose Consumption and/or Sale Have Been Banned, Withdrawn, Severely Restricted or Not Approved by Governments.'

Born in 1906 in Provo, Utah, she was married to the late Oliver Peterson and has four children.

End of interview